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ABSTRACT

Within the field of early childhood education, several issues are currently being debated and many new developments are emerging. One of these trends is toward the expansion and redefinition of early childhood education to include all educational experiences for children from birth to 8 years of age. Another trend is the increased interest in developmentally appropriate education, which takes into account what is known about how young children develop and learn, and matches that to the content and strategies planned for them in early childhood programs. A third trend is the renewed interest in integrated curricula. One approach to this is thematic organization, in which skills, facts, and subject-matter knowledge are integrated around a unifying theme. A fourth trend is toward the authentic assessment of children's learning, which is "the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect a child." Another trend is increased interest in mixed-age groupings in preschools and nongraded education in early primary grade programs. A final trend is toward multicultural education and anti-bias curricula in early childhood in response to rapidly growing minority populations, and increasing cultural pluralism and global awareness. (AC)

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Issues and Trends in Early Childhood Education

Jianhua Feng

Early childhood education is an exciting and dynamic field. Since the early 1980s, it has been undergoing tremendous transitions through which it has gained wide public attention and national interest in the United States of America. This rekindled focus is a combined effects of several significant factors which include increased knowledge about child development, particularly how children learn; increases in the number of children attending early childhood education programs at earlier ages; and changing family structures, functions, and needs, as well as sociopolitical changes in the American society. In response to the many changes, new ideas and theories in early childhood education have been formed and some have been put into practice. Still, a number of issues is being debated and many new developments are emerging. This paper presents some of the significant issues and trends in early childhood education today in the USA, specifically, (1) Expansion and Redefinition of Early Childhood Education; (2) Developmentally Appropriate Education; (3) Curriculum Integration; (4) Authentic Assessment; (5) Nongraded Education; and (6) Multicultural Education.

Early Childhood Education Redefined

With the beginning of the Head Start Program in 1965, early childhood education in the United States of America entered its modern period. Over the past three decades, the field of early childhood education has gained enormous amount of public attention and interest. Today's headlines in mass media magazines and daily newspapers herald

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increasing concern about how we educate young children. Annually, millions of young children are engaged in group educational experiences outside the home. The kind of early educational experiences children have will have a profound effect not only on their own lifes but, ultimately, on the whole of the society as well.

For many years the term early childhood education was used primarily to refer to educational programs for preschool- and kindergarten-aged children. It was considered as introductory experiences preparing the child for eventual entry into formal schooling, which began at the first-grade level. The term preschool itself suggests that schooling for three- and four-year-olds was viewed not as "real" school but rather as preparatory; in fact, many people considered it as optional experience, rather than an imperative one for all children. Kindergaten experience for five-year-olds or the year before first-grade was also traditionally seen as optional. Knidergarten did not become mandatory in most of the United States until the 1960s, with public school system required to provide kindergarten programs (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994).

Traditionally, preschool and kindergarten experiences remained separated from the grades in both form and content, and for the most part a clear distinction has been drawn between preschool, kindergarten and the elementary grades. Preschool and kindergarten have been seen as focusing on social and emotional issues, with heavy emphasis on play and "readiness" for school; while elementary grades have been recognized as a place where children engage in real learning and master basic academic skills.

In recent years, however, the meaning of the term early childhood education has been redefined to refer to a much broader array of children, programs, and settings. It has been expanded to include all educational experiences for children from birth to eight years of age (or through grade three). As defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1987), "an early childhood program is any part-day or full-day group program in a center, school, or other facility that serves children from birth through age 8. Early childhood programs include child care centers, private and public preschools,

kindergartens, and primary grade schools." (p. 1) This expanded definition erodes the traditional distinction between preschool and kindergarten experiences on the one hand, and kindergarten and the primary grades on the other. Great efforts are being made to provide continuity throughout this entire age span and to eliminate the sharp separation that has prevailed historically.

A broader view of what constitutes early childhood education is the result of two major factors, according to Kostelnik and her colleagues (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 1993). One is that evidence from research and practical experiences related to children's intellectual, social, and physical powers reveal that significant changes in young children's development are more likely to occur around 7 or 8 years of age than age 5. Children ages 3 and 8 share many common needs and characteristics. Another is the actual number of children enrolled in group education experience has increased. One reason for the increase is that more and more families with young children have adults who work outside the home. Research findings emphasizing the learning potential of young children have also become increasingly prolific through the past several decades. Parents, once satisfied with informal arrangements in which their children were simply kept safe, are now demanding more stimulating programs in which children's learning needs are also addressed. Additionally, reports documenting the long-term benefits of early childhood education, particularly for poor children, have been numerous and convincing. As a result of parents' needs for child care and their growing understanding of the benefits of early schooling, few children now enter first grade with no previous group education experience.

All of these developments have increased the scope and impact of early childhood education throughout the United States. The result is that a variety of institutions and professional groups are moving quickly to accept new levels of responsibility for educating young children. Such efforts have led to heightened interest in how to best create optimal programs in which children from all differen backgrounds can flourish.

Developmentally Appropriate Education for Young Children

In recent years, there is a trend toward increased emphasis on formal instruction in academic skills in early childhood programs, as a result of combined effects of various factors including parents' demand for better education, and national outcry for excellence and accountability. This trend toward pushing young children to achieve academically too much too soon has now been deplored by many early childhood educators (Elkind, 1993). Elkind (1993) believes that too much pressure too early places young children in a situation which increases the chances of educational burnout, as well as leading to the introduction of inappropriate teaching method. A growing body of research has emerged recently affirming that children learn most effectively through a concrete, play oriented approach to early childhood education (NAEYC, 1987).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published in 1986 "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8", which has since become maybe the most ever cited document among the early childhood education community. NAEYC (1987) believes that "a high quality early childhood program provides a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of young children. ... A major determinant of program quality is the extent to which knowledge of child development is applied in program practices." (p.1) It is the program that should be tailored to meet the needs of children, rather than expecting children to adjust to the demands of a specific program. (NAEYC, 1987).

Although individuals' and groups' perceptions of developmentally appropriate programs are not exactly the same in the wealth of materials currently available, the essentials remain consistent. First, developmentally appropriate means taking into account what is known about how young children develop and learn, and matching that to the content and strategies planned for them in early childhood programs. Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that

occur in children during the first 9 years of life. Knowledge of typical development of children provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences. Specialized knowledge about child development and learning is the cornerstone of professionalism in early childhood education.

Second, developmentally appropriate education means approaching children as individuals, not as a cohort group. Each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background. Teachers are called on daily to make decisions that require them to see each child as distinct from all others.

Third, developmentally appropriate means treating children with respect by recognizing their changing capabilities, and viewing them in the context of their family, culture, and community, and their past experience and current circumstances. Respect involves having faith in children's ability to eventually learn the information, behavior, and skills they will need to constructively function on their own. Having respect implies believing children are capable of changing their behavior and making self-judgment. Children must be allowed to think for themselves, make decisions, work toward their own solutions to problems, and communicate their ideas. (Kostelnik, and et al., 1993; NAEYC, 1987).

The concept of developmentally appropriate program and its derived guideline principles by NAEYC are largely based on the following principles of child development and childhood learning (Kostelnik, and et al., 1993; Bredkamp & Rosegrant, 1992):

1. Children develop holistically. The child is a whole being and develops in all interrelated areas which include aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, language, social, and physical development. No one facet of development exists independent from the others, nor is any one most valuable.

2. Child development follows a normative sequence. Development is sequential, and changes over time occur in an orderly fashion. Normative sequences have been found relative to all aspects of development from locomotion to moral development. Although there are often individual variations, the sequences tend to remain predictable.

3. Child development proceeds at varying rates within and among children. No two children are exactly alike. Even within every individual, various facets of development are dominant at different times throughout childhood.

4. Development is epigenic. Development is based on a foundation; past, present, and future are related and build on each other in succession. New capabilities and understandings arise out of and elaborate on what is already there.

5. Development has both cumulative and delayed effects. Beginning at birth, children accumulate a history of repeated, frequent experiences that may have positive or negative effects on their development depending on the circumstances. Some early experiences may influence children's functioning in ways that only become obvious later in life.

6. There are optimal periods of child development. Throughout the early childhood years, there are opportune times during which significant changes occur in children's development. During those optimal periods, children are more receptive to both positive and negative environmental influences than at other times.

7. Children learn best when their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically safe and secure.

8. Children construct knowledge. Children are active learners always struggling to make sense of the world.

9. Children learn through physical experience, social interaction, and reflection.

10. Children's learning styles differ. Everyone posses at least seven intelligences, according to Howard Gardner (1983), and a person's blend of competencies in each area produces a unique cognitive profile and determines the ways in which a person learns best. The seven intelligences are linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.

11. Children learn through play. Children's play is a primary vehicle for and indicator of their mental growth. All areas of development are enhanced through various kinds of children's play.

Although there is no one fixed and correct way to implement the idea that early childhood programs should be based on knowledge about how children develop and learn. All developmentally appropriate programs, however, share a set of key characteristics. These characteristics are identified by Feinburg and Mindess (1994) as the following:

1. The physical environment is designed to optimize concrete learning and to enable children to explore a wide variety of objects and materials.

2. Children have the opportunity to work alone, with one or two other children, in small groups, and in large group situations. Children have some options in choosing learning experiences.

3. The teacher observes, records, and assesses child and group progress and bases instruction on this information. Children's special talents, as well as areas of difficulty, are addressed.

4. The teacher is vibrant intellectually. He or she understands the importance of motivational strategies in stimulating children's intellectual and expressive activity and is alert to the teacher's role in shaping children's activity. The notion of cognitive conflict is respected. Hence, the adult share information, raises questions, and provokes experimentation in a wide variety of ways.

5. The academic areas of literacy and mathematics are crucial aspects of the curriculum, but they are taught in an interdisciplinary manner that makes them relevant to the child and builds respect for their importance.

6. Creativity is valued highly; hence, every effort is made to capitalize on children's imaginative, expressive thinking and productivity.

7. Social and emotional issues are viewed as an important part of intellectual development and are integrated into both classroom management and the curriculum.

8. Since young children are egocentric emotionally and intellectually, subject matter that is of personal interest to them is important in designing learning learning experinces. Consideration is given to family, culture, and community concerns. (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994, p. 6-7)

Curriculum Integration in Early Childhood

In a position statement by NAEYC and the National Association of Early childhood Specialists in State departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) (1992) curriculum is defined as "an organized framework that delineates the content that children are to learn, the process through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help children achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur" (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, p. 10). In planning a curriculum for young children, teachers must select objectives, select and organize content, choose the appropriate learning experiences, and determine how to assess both children's growth and the program itself (Brewer, 1992). The early childhood curriculum should be planned around the developmental needs of the children in the classroom. The goals and objectives of the curriculum must be designed to strengthen all aspects of the children's development.

When designing curriculum teachers have several options for choosing how to organize the learning experiences. The most common approaches to organizing curriculum for young children are a facts approach and a skills approach. With a facts approach the experiences are arranged so that children learn a given set of factual information such as the day of the week, or the names of the colors. With a skills approach experiences are selected and arranged so that children learn to cut on a line, to share, or to find information in reference books. In elementary schools the most common organization has been the subject-matter approach, whereby children learn reading, or math, or social studies. Another approach is thematic organization, in which skills, facts, and subject-matter knowledge are integrated around a unifying theme, such as a study of ocean life (Brewer, 1992).

The idea of integrating curriculum in early childhood is not a new one. At the turn of the century, John Devey first proposed that curriculum be related to children's real-life experiences and organized around projects. In recent years, as part of efforts to implement developmentally appropriate education in early childhood, the thematic approach to curriculum organization is receiving renewed attention. The notion of integrated curriculum is an important concept in early childhood education because children develop and learn in total contexts: one area of development influences another, one area of learning influences another, and young children do not view learning as separate subject matter areas (Puckett & Black, 1994).

Theme teaching involves offering children an array of activities built around a central idea. Teachers select such ideas, keeping mind children's interests, their developmental capacities, and the ecological context in which they live and learn. Related activities are integrated into all aspects of the curriculum and take place within a concentrated time frame. This creates a common thread among activities that facilitates children's generalization of knowledge and skills from one experience to another. Through participation in a theme, children form linkages among individual bits of information.

These relationships contribute to children's concept development and are the most important reason for advocating a theme-oriented approach to teaching (Kostelnik, et al., 1993).

Organizing learning experiences around a theme can be productive, but if thematic teaching is to be successful, the theme must be carefully selected, activities carefully planned, and evaluation of the theme and of children's learning carefullu monitored (Brewer, 1992). Integrative themes need to engage children in thoughtful, purposeful learning. Carefully selected themes provide opportunities for learning facts in a meaningful context, for developing and applying skills, and for increasing knowledge in subject areas.

In choosing a theme there are several important considerations. Kates and Chard (1989) suggest the following criteria for selecting a theme: relevance, the opportunity for application of skills, the availability of resources, teacher interest, and the time of year. Themes are relavant when the concepts they represent are directly tied to children's real-life experiences and build on their interests. In considering the opportunities for the application of skills, teachers must think about whether there will be opportunities for the children to engage in reading, writing, and computation activities that have real meaning for them. Availability of resources must also be considered because theme studies require many resources and materials. To guide effective theme teaching, Kostelnik, Soderman, and Whiren (1993) suggest that the following principles be kept in mind:

1. The theme is directly tied to children's real-life experiences, building on what they know and what they want to know more about.

2. Each theme represents a concept for children to investigate. Throughout its implementation, the teacher helps children build theme-related concepts rather than expecting children to memorize isolated bits of information.

3. Every theme is supported by factual content that has been adequately researched.

4. All themes integrate content learning and process learning.

5. Theme-related information is conveyed to children through hands-on activities and active inquiry.

6. Theme-related activities represent a variety of curricular domains and differing modes of child involvement.

7. Children have access to the same content more than once and in more than one way.

8. The theme allows for the integration of several curricular areas within the program.

9. Each theme is expanded or revised in accordance with children's demonstrated interests and understandings. (p. 319)

Authentic Assessment of Children's Learning

Evaluation is an integral part of the educational process. Effective teachers continually monitor and assess students' needs and progress, appraising academic, social, and physical growth and planning individualized programs to support that growth. Effective teachers realize the importance of understanding where their students are so they can plan a program that is developmentally appropriate for each child.

There are numerous ways in which to assess children's progress in an educational program. However, for various reasons the most popular method in today's schools is the use of standardized tests. They provide a quick and easy method to document and compare one student to another within the same class or age group. According to recent reports, approximately 55 million standardized tests of achievement, competency, and basic skills are currently administered each year to fulfil local and state mandates, with an additional 30 to 40 million given in compensatory and special education and another 2 million to screen kindergarten and prekindgarten children (Kostelnik, 1993). Schools rely on standardized tests to make important decisions about children's entry into and exit from kindergarten,

promotion from grade to grade, and placement in remedial programs. Standardized tests influence not only these decisions, but also institutional and instructional goals and teacher performance. Perhaps even more important, because test scores are used to measure a school's worth, standardized tests are driving the curriculum in schools nationwide. Many curriculum have moved from child-centered ones to scope-and-sequence efforts to mastery of basic skills to even more limited test-driven bits of information. Teachers teach to the test and place heavy emphasis on worksheets, drill, and other inappropriate teaching strategies in early childhood classrooms. Children are being taught to provide the "right" answer on the answer sheet, but are not challenged to think (NAEYC, 1988; Day, 1994; Puckett & Black, 1994).

In recent years, the concept of authentic assessment is grudually gaining popularity and support from the early childhood education community led by NAEYC. NAEYC (1988) believes the purpose of evaluating must be to improve services for children and ensure that children benefit from their educational experiences. Authentic assessment is defined as "the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect a child" (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, p.10). Authentic assessment encompasses the many forms of evaluation available to educational decision makers. It assigns priority to the needs and accomplishments of the individual learner and provides continuous, qualitative information that can be used by the teacher to guide the instruction of individuals (Puckett & Black, 1994). One method of authentic assessment is to assemble and review a portfolio of the child's work.

The portfolio is a record of the child's process of learning: what the child has learned and how he/she has gone about learning; how the child thinks, questions, analyzes, synthesize, produces, creates; and how he/she interact with others (Grace, 1992). It is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student and/or others the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in one or more areas. Portfolios enable children to

participate in assessing their own work; keep track of individual children's progress; and provide a basis for evaluating the quality of individual children's overall performance (Puckett & Black, 1994: Grace, 1992).

The portfolio can include work samples, records of various forms of systematic observation, and screening tests. Teachers and parents can follow children's progress by reviewing children's writings, drawings, logs of books read by or to them, videos or photos of large projects, tape recordings of the children engaging in learning activities such as reading or dictating stories and others. Systematic observations should take place at various times of day and in various circumstances. Observations of children's learning must be objective, selective, unobtrusive, and carefully recorded. Ideally, a portfolio must include observations of several forms scu as anecdotal records, checklist or inventory, rating scales, questions and requests, and screening tests.

Without a purpose, a portfolio is just a folder of student work. Portfolios are used to make sense of children's work, to communicate about their work, and to relate the work to a larger context. A portfolio should contain a statement of purpose and a wide variety of work samples. Materials in a portfolio must be dated, sequenced to reflect the most recent work, and categorized to allow subsequent analysis and interpretation of the child's achievements. Portfolios are not meant to be used for comparing children to each other. Rather, they are used to document individual children's progress over time. Interpretations and conclusions about a child's achievement, abilities, strengths, weakness, and needs should be based on the full range of that child's development, as documented by the data in the porfolio, and on the teacher's knowledge of curriculum and stages of development (Grace, 1992).

Authentic assessment is effective because it is performance oriented, it involves the children themselves, parents, and teachers, and it assists teachers in instructional decision making. It is logitudinal and individualized. Athentic assessment involves a variety of methods that are child oriented and contextualized. The key to developing a truly authentic

assessment program is to employ a number of different types of assessment tools, using a variety of techniques, in order to gather a great deal of information about the child (Day, 1994).

Nongraded Education In Early Childhood Programs

All early childhood programs must be organized to provide effective education for children. Numerous attempts have been made to determine if one type of program organization is more effective than another. In recent years, interest in the potential benefits of mixed-age grouping in preschools and nongraded program in the early primary grades has increased steadily. As educators and citizens are reevaluating their school systems and proposing reforms to meet the needs of diverse social and economic groups in the 1990s, proposals for nongraded primary education are receiving a great deal of attention, including the Kentucky Educational Reform Act and the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century.

The concept of nongraded education is not new. It dates back to the "one-room school", the norm until the mid-1800s when "the revolutionary idea of mass public education created the need for an efficient, economic system capable of handling large numbers of students". (Gaustad, 1992, p. 2) Various names have been used to describe this approach, including multiage grouping, multiage classes, mixed-age grouping, ungraded primary, family grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and vertical grouping. Regardless of its name, nongraded education has become a key element in educational reforms being enacted across the nation (AASA, 1992).

Nongraded education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by grade designation. In simplest terms, the nongraded model allows students to advance from one concept/skill level to the next as they are ready, regardless of age or grade (AASA, 1992). Rather than passing or failing at the end of the year, children progress through the

curriculum at their own individual rates.

Behind the trend toward mixed-age grouping or nongraded education, there are several reasons which include the widespread concern about the high proportion of young children who are retained in the early grades, increasing recognition that grade repetition does not help children overcome difficulties in meeting narrow and specific grade achievement expectations, attempts to implement developmentally appropriate teaching and curriculum practices in the early grades, and growing awareness of the potential benefits of cross-age interaction to intellectual and social development (Kates, 1992).

When educators talk about grouping children, they usually focus on how the makeup of a class is determined. Should children be clustered together by like characteristics in homogeneous groupings, or should the composition of each group be more heterogeneous? Should children move through the educational system along a particular track as determined by age, ability, or interest, or should class and group assignments be more diverse and fluid? These questions have been debated for many years. Traditional graded education assumes that students who are the same age are at basically the same level of cognitive development, can be taught in the same way, and will progress at the same rate. Intellectual development is assumed to be the goal, and the division of curriculum into discrete skills and subjects to be the most effective organization. Ability tracking or the practice of grouping children by IQ or level of demonstrated skill in a prescribed area of the curriculum has been common practice since the early 1900s. The foundation of grouping like children together is sometimes based on the maturationist view that certain children are simply too immature to do the work expected within a particular classroom or grade. From this perspective, children who are considered "too young" or "not ready" are frequently placed in alternative programs (e.g. developmental kindergarten, transitional first grade), placed in groups moving at a slower pace, or retained (Gausta, 1992; Kostelnik, et al., 1993).

In contrast, nongraded education is grounded on the understanding that young children actually vary in their rates of intellectual development. Children often progress at different rates in different areas of achievement and may alternately spurt ahead and hit plateaus rather than moving at a steady pace. The nongraded education movement is not associated with any particular type of school system, however, school, district, and state initiatives across the country share a number of common beliefs:

1. The nongraded program frees children from an arbitrary timeframe. Children grow and develop at different rates in their early years. In the nongraded classroom, teachers do not make arbitrary determination about whether students are ahead or behind when they are five, six, or seven years old.

2. Children can work with other children who are at various levels. In doing so, they learn a great deal through social interaction. The classroom becomes a laboratory for learning. Whether the child is the brightest or slowest, he/she can operate at his or her own level in a group.

3. Teachers change from being a transmitter of knowledge to a more active role of supporter, guide, and facilitator of children's learning. Teachers can see the natural strengths of a child and develop those strengths, rather than seeing the child as something to be "fixed."

4. Teachers are able to work together to make sure that learning takes place. Children can have the same teacher or teaching team for more than one year. This approach allows teachers to use what they have learned about a child in the first year for planning learning experiences the next year.

5. Parent-teacher communication is enhanced. The nongraded education recognizes the immediate and important relationship between parents and teachers in the education of an individual child and the quality of education the child receives. (AASA, 1992)

Nongraded education has been proven to have many benefits for young children. A comprehensive review of reasearch by Kilian Katz and her colleagues (Katz et al., 1990) shows that both older and younger children can benefit socially and academically from mixed-age grouping. Older children in mixed-age groups have opportunities to learn leadership skills and prosocial behaviors in interaction with younger children not possible with agemates. Younger children have older ones to imitate and are able to learn new, mature social play skills. Children's cognitive skills may be enhanced as they work on problems with others whose knowledge or abilities are similar but not identical. Opportunities for "cognitive conflict" that challenges but does not exceed children's capacities stimulates the thinking of all the participants. Mixed-age groupings serve to relax the rigid, lock-step curriculum with narrowly defined age-graded expectations, which are inappropriate for many children. Research related to peer tutoring and cooperative learning indicate that both novice and experts benefit from shared learning experiences.

However, simply grouping children of different ages in classes cannot by itself yield the benefits. If benefts are to be relaized, the curriculum must be modified to provide a variety of opportunities for children to work together on projects and other activities, preferably in small multi-age groups which each individual can contribute in different ways to the total efforts. Teaching strategies that can help realize the benefits include encouraging more knowledgeable and experienced children to assist less able ones as needed; encouraging younger children to request assistance from more competent classmates; and encouraging older and more experienced children to take responsibility for helping the others (Katz, 1992).

Although the concept of nongraded education is gaining momentum across the country, many educators and parents still have important questions about the movement. The most common concerns are:

1. Instruction in the nongraded program is very different from the traditional graded classrooms, which may be threatening to some educators.

2. Discipline in a nongraded program is a potential problem.

3. America's textbook publishing system serves mainly single-grade classrooms and impedes the transition to nongraded education. In the "scope and sequence" model, children at every grade levelare trained in carefully delineated subject areas before they move on to the next grade.

4. Combining older and younger children in the same classes will make older children appear "slow." Also, teachers of mixed-age groups sometimes provide fewer challenges for older children. On the other hand, a perceived gap between the work of older and younger children may frustrate younger students (AASA, 1992).

Multicultural Education and Anti-Bias Curriculum In Early Childhood

Demand for the reform of schooling in the United States has been a continuing theme throughout the twentieth century. The educational reform movement gained new momentum in the mid-1980s, beginning with the Reagan administration's report "A Nation at Risk." Local, sate, national reports on education called on educators, parents, and students to push for excellence in the nation's schools. State legislators and local school boards responded by requiring more rigorous curricula and standards for student achievement. However, teachers have been provided with little direction or assistance to ensure that all students are able to realize that excellence. Thus, educators today are faced with an overwhelming challenge to prepare students from diverse cultural backgrounds to live in a rapidly changing society and world in which some groups have greater societal benefits than others because of their race, sex, socioeconomic level, religion, lack of diability, or age (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). Bennett (1990) asserts, "educational excellence in our schools cannot be achieved without educational equity. Equity in education means equal opportunities for all students to develop to their fullest potential" (p. 13).

Along with the demand for academic excellence and equity, rapidly growing minority populations, increasing cultural pluralism, global awareness, and democratic ideals rooted in American values together call for better understanding and respect for all people and their cultures. The United States of America is a very ethnically and culturally diverse country. Today approximately 25 percent of this society's school-age children are ethnic minorities. It is estimated that by the year 2000 over 30 percent of American school-age population will be children of color (Bennett, 1990). Given the extensive research indicating that disproportionately high numbers of ethnic minority students and the economically poor are droping out of school or are being suspended or expelled, and that disproportionately high numbers of those who do remain in school are achieving far below their potential, teachers today are facing a tremendous challenge. There is also a certan urgency about the need to foster global arareness among today's children. The human race faces a number of critical concerns that if left unresolved are likely to result in the destruction of life as we know it: environmental pollution, poverty, overpopulation, the spread of AIDS and other diseases. The resolution of these problems as well as participation in global trade and economic development requires global cooperation. This cooperation requires human beings who possess some degree of cross-cultural understanding. Finally, equity is not only a matter of bettering the educational system. It is required if the American democratic ideals are valued: basic human rights, social justice, respect for alternative life choices, and equal opportunity for all. To make reality fit these ideals, it is necessary to reduce the ignorance that breeds racism and to develop the understanding and actions people need to become antiracist.

Children are aware of differences in color, language, gender, and physical ability at a very young age. Numerous research studies about the process of identity and attitude development conclude that children learn by observing the differences and similarities among people and by absorbing the spoken and unspoken messages about those differences (Hohensee & Derman-Sparks, 1992). The biases and negative stereotypes

about various aspects of human diversity still prevalant in the American society undercut all children's healthy development and ill-equip them to interact effectively with many people in the world. Multicultural education and anti-bias curriculum are attempted to nurture the development of every child's fullest potential by actively addressing issues of diversity and equity in the classroom. Whaley and Swadner (1990) argues for beginning multicultural education in infant and toddler programs. Very young children learn to discriminate differences and classfy things and feelings; they can also learn to be more empathetic than was once believed. Programs that support multicultural education are important as the very young child begins to learn about people other than family. Teachers of preschoolers can make sure that materials (books, music, dolls, and so on) represent a variety of cultures, use pictures of different cultural and ethnic groups involved in a variety of experiences, and take every opportunity to help children learn to care for others.

Multicultural education has been defined in numerous ways by various groups and individuals from different perspectives and disciplines. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (1987) has defined multicultural education as a perspective that recognizes "(1) the social, political, and economic realities that individuals experience in culturally diverse and complex human encounters and (2) the importance of culture, race, sex and gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and exceptionalities in the education process" (p. 57). According to Brewer (1992), regardless of the differences among definitions, multicultural education and anti-bias curriculum are terms used to describe educational programs that attempt to teach children respect for all people and their cultures. "Multicultural education is simultaneously about multiple cultures, in multiple cultures, and of students from different cultural backgrounds. It is education for all students" (Hernandez, 1989). Specific curriclum goals of multicultural education in early childhood programs are to foster each child's: (1) construction of a knowledgeable, confident self-identity; (2) comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds; (3) critical thinking about bias; and (4) ability to stand up for herself or

himself, and for others, in the face of bias (Honensee & Derman-Sparks, 1992).

Multicultural education is not a new concept, the effort, however to eliminate racisim and prejudice by making students and teachers more aware and accepting of the cultural diversity in the American socity is relatively new and gaining importance. The concept of multicultural education has existed since the 1920s when educators began writing about and trainging others in intercultural education and ethnic studies (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). The goal was to make the dorminant majority populations more tolerant and accepting toward immigrants to maintain national unity and social control. According to the typology developed by Sleeter and Grant (1988), several approaches mark the evolution of multicultural education since the 1996s. In the 1960s, desegregation was enforced in the nation's schools. The Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different approach is to promote the academic achievement of students from minority ethnic groups and lower socioeconomic levels, those with limited English proficiency, and those with other special educational needs. It focuses on the use of culturally relevant curricula, basic skills development, and sensitivity to individual learning styles. The goal was to help the minorities fit into the American mainstream.

Desegregation efforts also provide impetus for the Human Relations approach. This approach emphasizes intergroup relationships and self-concept. It is intended to reduce intergroup conflict, promote greater tolerance of individual differences, and foster positive interaction among students. The curriculum and instruction associated with this approach focus on addressing stereotyping and name-calling, teaching about individual differences and similarities, and recognizing group contributions.

The civil rights movement in the late 1960s brought a renewed interest in ethnic studies. During this period, the Single-Group Studies approach focuses on in-depth study of particular ethnic groups. This approach centers instruction on various ethnic histories and cultures, with the main objectives of proving students with insight and instilling pride in their own racial/ethnic backgrounds. Most of these programs were ethnic-specific, and

minority groups were presented as distinct entities and usually treated separately.

In the 1970s, with the growth and development of ethnic studies, Multicultural Education emerged as a more comprehensive approach. With cultural diversity and equal opportunity as its cornerstones, this approach examines and takes into account the relationships among culture, ethnicity, language, gender, handicap, and social class in developing educational programs. In the classroom, content is structured around the contributions and perspectives of different groups. Instruction emphasizes critical thinking skills and uses culturally relevant materials and curricular adaptations. As in other approaches, use of other languages, learning strategies, and cooperative learning is prominent.

A more recent, yet controversial approach is the Education That Is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist. This approach represents an extension of multicultural education in the direction of more definitive social action. It incorporates a much greater curricular emphasis on active student involvement in social issues (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) and on development of problem-solving and political action skills. In addtion to curricular adaptations and cooperative learning, instruction emphasizes development of decision-making skills.

The United States is a multicultural nation where cultural diversity continues to increase and members of subordinate groups do not yet share equally in social, economic, and political power. Multicultural education is an educational concept that addresses cultural diversity and the provision of equality in schools. For it to become a reality in the school situation, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education. The cultural backgrounds of students are as important in developing effective instructional strategies as are their physical and mental capabilities. Educators need to understand the cultural backgrounds and use those cultural advantages to develop effective instructional strategies. They also must understand the influence of racism, sexism, and classism on the lives of their students.

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